

March 24, 2020

The Honorable Donald J. Trump
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

cc:
Steve T. Mnuchin, Secretary of the Treasury
George E. Perdue III, Secretary of Agriculture
Wilbur R. Ross, Secretary of Commerce

Re: Domestic Seafood Infrastructure

Dear President Trump:

We write as participants in America's seafood supply chain, a critical component of the country's domestic food infrastructure and one of the major economic drivers in our country's coastal communities and states.

Empty restaurants, cafes, and dining halls are a visible reminder of the ongoing, unprecedented public health efforts to blunt the spread of COVID-19. The livelihoods of the chefs, cooks, servers, and other staff are obvious and direct casualties of those government efforts. The economic disruption caused by forced restaurant closures and active encouragement for Americans to "shelter in place," however, extend far beyond the food service sector.

There is a direct line from those temporarily shuttered businesses to the food distribution chain that supports them; the companies and workers who harvest, farm, prepare, process, package, and distribute the food products that we produce in our country. The Department of Homeland Security rightly recognized in its March 19 memorandum that seafood workers are "essential critical infrastructure workers" that warrant prioritization in government support to help protect and maintain our role in food security.

In the case of seafood, more than two-thirds (68%) of the \$102.2 billion that consumers paid for U.S. fishery products in 2017 was spent at food service establishments (as opposed to home consumption). As a result, in many fisheries, the sudden near shutdown of restaurants and other storefronts has caused demand to evaporate overnight, threatening the continued economic viability of the entire supply chain. This could mean the loss of tens of thousands of well-paying jobs. In those fisheries where demand remains intact, the greatest ongoing challenge will be to make sure employers have state and local support for undergoing testing, screening, and potential quarantine protocols needed to ensure a healthy workforce. Without workers, healthy and sustainable fisheries would produce only a fraction of their potential. Congress and the Administration must work with state and local governments in that regard.

As you have heard from other industries, supply chains cannot be turned on and off like a light switch. Once lost, a supply chain and the infrastructure that supports it can be exceptionally difficult and costly to restart. Failure to act boldly now to preserve our country's domestic seafood infrastructure will impose far greater costs on our economy and cause permanent damage to our nation's ability to harvest, farm, process, and distribute seafood products.

Though we write specifically on behalf of our country's seafood infrastructure, we expect that the bold actions we are suggesting would help stave off disaster for food supply industries as a whole. Our domestic food distribution network produces nearly \$700 billion in revenue annually, and employs nearly 1.5 million workers. The value of specialty crops annually is about \$65 billion, and the value of processed fish products is about \$12 billion annually. Food manufacturing tends to have relatively high payments to salaries and benefits compared with other food sector industries, with salaries and benefits accounting for half of the value added in food manufacturing.

Bipartisan efforts to keep Americans safe from COVID-19 and to deliver much-needed assistance to the most vulnerable among us are absolutely appropriate. We applaud efforts of Congress and the Administration to extend unemployment insurance and to address the needs of seniors, children, and other vulnerable Americans. However, with an uncertain timeline ahead of us in this crisis, we must also take additional bold action to preserve the operating liquidity of the food production employers who provide and support domestic food infrastructure and the millions of jobs it supports. Failure to do so risks unprecedented decline in essential economic activity that will severely affect both workers and our nation's ability to continue feeding itself.

The below measures would help to mitigate the impacts of the public health response to COVID-19 and maintain our critical industry. To be clear, suggested dollars amounts should be considered a starting point to address the still unknown impacts of this evolving crisis:

1. **Ensure USDA's Section 32 funding levels are maintained (regardless of whether tariff revenues are diminished) and expand to include an additional appropriation of at least \$2.0 billion for Section 32 activities that directly support the supply chain of domestically produced seafood to end consumers.** This existing mechanism could keep workers employed, supply chains operating, employers open, and nutritional needs met. The program provides for the government purchase of food for consumers, starting with kids and vulnerable families. For over 80 years, the Section 32 program has provided assistance to food products, the production and distribution of which is generally not supported by larger price support programs.

We also request that you consider expediting purchases by temporarily suspending federal contracting rules and regulations so as to facilitate immediate assistance to a broader cross section of U.S. businesses, free from bureaucratic red tape that might otherwise delay relief.

2. **Provide an initial \$1.5 billion to the Department of Commerce to provide direct relief for fishery disasters caused by Federal, State, and Local government responses to COVID-19.** Sections 312(a) and 315 of the Magnuson Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA) and the Sections 308(b) and 308(d) Interjurisdictional Fisheries Act (IFJ) empower the Secretary of Commerce to provide multiple forms of relief to businesses and fishing communities impacted by certain harms—including natural and man-made causes. We request that you work with Congress to appropriate and make funding available as soon as practicable to fishery and seafood businesses uniquely impacted by closure of restaurant and food service industries, and specifically designate the spread and impact of COVID-19 as a natural and man-made cause eligible for fishery disaster assistance. To ensure funding can be distributed quickly, we also request that you waive certain requirements under MSA and IFJ for this funding, so that injured businesses can quickly access needed aid. Please also immediately release all previously appropriated disaster relief funds so as to inject direct liquidity to coastal employers.
3. **Appropriate a minimum of \$500 million for the Secretary of Commerce, in consultation with the Department of Agriculture, to purchase surplus commercial seafood that can be shipped overseas or supplied to domestic organizations.** These organizations could include assisted living communities, hospitals, as well as State and Local government programs, among others. Facilitating direct government purchase of products that have gone unsold due to the government's unprecedented response to the COVID-19 crisis would both ensure stability in this key sector and provide healthy proteins for Americans.

Thank you for your attention to these well-intended policy recommendations. We will continue to offer suggestions to promote economic security and stability for America's food production infrastructure as the current health situation abates. Commercial fishing and seafood interests are highly diverse between regions, so additional assistance may be needed to address near-term critical needs for some parts of the seafood value chain.

Please do not hesitate to contact the signatories below if we can be of additional assistance in our nation's effort to combat this crisis, while preserving the essential infrastructure that underlies our economy.

Sincerely,



Anthony J. Dal Ponte
General Counsel
Pacific Seafood Group



Bob Vanasse
Executive Director
Saving Seafood



Paul Zajicek
Executive Director
National Aquaculture Association



John Connelly
President
National Fisheries Institute



Chris Barrows
President
Pacific Seafood Processors Assoc.



Stephanie Quah
Managing Director
Cargill



Bill DiMento
VP Sustainability & Gov. Affairs
High Liner Foods



Joe Bundrant
CEO
Trident Seafoods



Sean J. O'Scannlain
President & CEO
Fortune International



Randy Rhodes
President
Harvest Select



Roger A. O'Brien
President & CEO
Santa Monica Seafood



ALASKA
Bering Sea Crabbers
Jamie Goen
Executive Director
Alaska Bering Sea Crabbers



Matt Roach
Director of Corp. Business Alignment
Icicle Seafoods



W. Ron Allen
Tribal Chairman/CEO
Jamestown S'Klallam Tribe



Leigh Habegger
Executive Director
Seafood Harvesters of America



David Goldenberg
Executive Director
California Sea Urchin Commission



Kurt Grinnell
Owner/CEO
Native Trust LLC



Dan Nomura
President
Alaska General Seafoods



Peggy Howse
General Manager
All Seas Wholesale



Sinclair Wilt
Vice President
Alyeska Seafoods, Inc.



Barry Cohen
Chairman of the Board
Atlantic Capes Fisheries



Andrew Bornstein
Executive Vice President
Bornstein Seafoods

CALIFORNIA SHELLFISH CO., INC.



Eugene Bugatto
President & CEO
California Shellfish Co., Inc.



Michael Merrifield
Owner
Cape Canaveral Shrimp Company



Jeff Michels
President
Cascade Organics LLC



Chang Lee
Plant Manager
Da Yang Seafood



Joe Cappuccio
President
Del Mar Seafoods



Kurt Englund
President
Englund Marine & Supply



John C. Young
President
Euclid Fish Company



Kipp Baratoff
CEO
Fishpeople Seafood



Timothy Dunsizer
Vice President – Owner
Fisherman's Ideal Supply House



Mark Franklin
President & CEO
Golden Alaska Seafoods, LLC



Hood Canal Mariculture
Jonathan P Davis
Owner
Hood Canal Mariculture, Inc.



Inland Seafood
Mary Smith
Director of Sustainability
Inland Seafood



David Kelly
CEO
Innovasea



Craig Jacobs
Owner
OC Wild Seafood



Sean Ferguson
President
Oceanic Logistics



Bret Scholtes
CEO
Omega Protein



SueAnna Harrison
Owner
Oregon's Choice Gourmet



Jerod Goodin
President
Pacific Dream Seafoods, Inc.



Tom Trumper
Owner
Pacific Rim Seafood, LLC



Scott A. Johnson
Controller
PanaPesca USA Inc.



Barry D. Collier
President & CEO
Peter Pan Seafoods, Inc.



F. Joseph Bersch III
President of General Partner
Phoenix Processor Limited
Partnership



Phil Gibson
CEO
Resiliensea Group LLC



Gerald Pack
President
Safe Harbor Seafood



Meghan Lapp
Fisheries Liaison
Seafreeze Ltd. and Seafreeze
Shoreside



Derek Figueroa
President & CEO
Seattle Fish Company



James D. Busse
President
Seafood Atlantic Inc.



Matthew Kilfoil
VP of Business Performance
The Fish Company - Miami



Tom Enlow
President
Unisea



Heather S. Donnell
Office Manager
Ventura Harbor Marina & Yacht Yard



Ross Butler
Chief Executive Officer
Wanchese Fish Company



Mark JoHahnson
President
Westward Seafoods, Inc.



Vincent Bryan III
CEO
Whooshh Innovations, Inc.



Jeanna Merrifield
Owner
Wild Ocean Seafood



Jonathan P Davis
President
Baywater Shellfish Farms



Todd Madsen
President
Blue Ocean Mariculture



Brian Menke
Owner
Cascade Aqua Farms



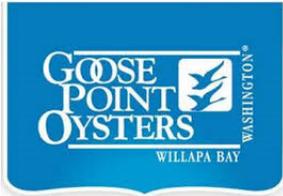
Dave Rudie
Catalina Offshore Products



Kyle Lentz & Shina Wysocki
President & Vice President
Chelsea Farms



Kris Nicholls
Chief Operating Officer
Cooke Aquaculture USA



Kathleen Nisbet Monecy
Vice President
Goose Point Oysters/Nisbet Oyster Co



Brian Koval
Hatchery Manager
Hawaiian Shellfish LLC



Bruce Brenner
President
J J Brenner Oyster Company



Tammy & Doug Devlin
Owners
Lilliwaup Oysters



Donna Lanzetta
CEO
Manna Fish Farms, Inc



Xin Liu
President/Owner
Oregon Oyster Farms, Inc.



Raz Halili
Vice President
Prestige Oysters Inc.



William Taylor
Executive Management
Taylor Shellfish Farms



**The Noble Oyster
HC Snail**

Daniel Hanson
Owner
HC Snail, LLC



Amy Daugherty
Executive Director
Alaska Trollers Association



Kathy Fosmark
Chair
Alliance of Comm. for Sustainable Fisheries



Marissa Wilson
Interim Executive Director
Alaska Marine Conservation Council



Ben Platt
President
California Coast Crab Association



David Goldenberg
Executive Director
California King Salmon Council



Diane Pleschner-Steele
Executive Director
CA Wetfish Producers Association



Phillip Lestenkof
President
Central Bering Sea Fishermen's Association



Kim Selkoe
Executive Director
Commercial Fishermen of Santa Barbara



Robert D. Alverson
Manager
Fishing Vessel Owners Association



Chad See
Executive Director
Freezer Longline Coalition



Bonnie Brady
Executive Director
Long Island Commercial Fishing Association



Heather Mann
Executive Director
Midwater Trawlers Cooperative



Tom Hafer
President
Morro Bay Commercial Fishermen's Organization



Captain Bob Zales II
President
National Association of Charterboat Operators



Yelena Nowak
Executive Director
Oregon Trawl Commission



Noah Oppenheim
Executive Director
Pacific Coast Fed of Fishing Assoc



Jana Hennig
Executive Director
Positively Groundfish



Laurie Stevens
Executive Director
Southeastern Fisheries Association



Captain Bob Zales II
Consultant
Southern Offshore Fishing Assoc



Brett Veerhusen
Executive Director
Under Sixty Cod Harvesters



Brent Paine
Executive Director
United Catcher Boats



Mike Conroy
President
West Coast Fisheries Consultants



Lori Steele
Executive Director
West Coast Seafood Processors Assoc



Northwest Aquaculture Alliance
Jeanne McKnight
Executive Director
Northwest Aquaculture Alliance



Sebastian Belle
Executive Director
Maine Aquaculture Association



Beth Walton
Executive Director
Oyster South



Margaret A. Pilaro
Executive Director
Pacific Coast Shellfish Growers Assn



Nathan Tsao
Hatchery Manager
Jamestown Point Whitney Shellfish
Venture



Larry Oetker
Executive Director
Humboldt Bay Harbor, Recreation &
Conservation District



Sherry Flumerfelt
Executive Director
Monterey Bay Fisheries Trust



Dwayne Oberhoff
Executive Director
Morro Bay Community Quota Fund



Kristin Decas
CEO & Port Director
The Port of Hueneme



Blake Anderson
Harbormaster
Santa Cruz Port District

**Andria's Seafood
Restaurant & Market**

Michael J Wagner
Owner

Arcadia Point Seafood

Vicki & Steve Wilson
Owners

B.P fishing Inc.

Burlin Phillips
Owner

**Cape Cod Commercial
Fishermen's Alliance,
Inc.**

John Pappalardo
CEO

**Capt. Mike's Seafood
LLC**

Mike Fitzpatrick
Owner/Operator

Cascade Aqua Farms

Brad Mencke
Manager

**Charter Fisherman's
Association**

Gary Jarvis
Mayor - City of Destin, Florida

Colosse Inc.

Stacy Lutz
President

Denotta Seafood Co

Caron Denotta
Owner

**Drayton Harbor Oyster Elston's Clam & Oyster
Company Co.**

Steve Seymour
Owner

L. Michael Elston
President

Floribbean Wholesale

Michael Black
President

Florida Quality Seafood

Jesse Flowers
President

**Fernandina Seafood
Company**

Jesse Flowers
President/Owner

Fisherman's Wharf

Christopher Shepperd
CEO

Frost Fisheries, LLC

Dean Frost
Owner

**Grassy Bar Oyster
Company, Inc.**

George Trevelyan
President

Gulf Fresh Inc.

Joseph Abdo
President

Harbor Pride Seafood

Jeremy A. Streig
Founder

**Hurricane Pass
Seafood**

Nick Ruland
Manager/Owner

Kamilche Sea Farms

Charles Stephens
Co-Owner

Long Fisheries Inc.

Tyler Long
President

Lutz Seafood Inc.

Stacey Lutz
President

**Main Vain Charters
LLC**

Antonio Giambanco
Owner

Mickeys Wild Chinook

Carol Takacs Ritter
Owner

**Oceanside Bait Co.
Inc.**

James Gardner
Owner

Ocean Run Seafoods

Donald Snow
President

**Oregon's Local Coast
Seafood**

Kelly Hanson
Owner

P.M Fishing inc.

Gideon Mease
Owner

ProFish International

Wally Pereyra
Owner/Chairman

**Rhode Island
Fishermen's Alliance**

Richard Fuka
Rhode Island Fishermen's Alliance

**Renewable Resources
Group**

Nicole E. Neeman Brady
Managing Principal & COO

Rocky Bay Seafoods

David Barton
Shellfish Biologist

Rogue King Seafood

Jeff Werner
Co-Owner of Seafood Market

Salty Dog Seafood

Sara Hinton
Farm Manager

**Saltydos Albacore
Tuna**

Frank Akers
Owner

**San Diego Bay
Aquaculture & Acacia
Pacific Aquaculture**

Rebecca Richards & Norm Abell
Managing Principal

Sea Spirit

Carl Duwell
Owner

Shenanegan Seafood

Harry Allen
Owner

The Builders Initiative

Peter Bryan
Senior Program Officer

**Washington Trollers
Association**

Guy Lutz
Member

Watson Fishery Inc.

Shawn Watson
President

Westport Cold Inc.

Michael Cornman
Member

**Westport Custom
Seafood LLC**

John C. Galvich
General Manager

Westport Seafood Inc.

Michael Cornman
President.

Winter Rose Inc.

Gretar Gudmundsson
President

- | | | |
|----------------------|--------------------------|------------|
| 1. Eric Fosmark | F/V Vinland | California |
| 2. Scott Fosmark | F/V Yaznak/Queen Corrine | California |
| 3. Sal Mineo | F/V Mineo Bros. | California |
| 4. Tim Obert | F/V Stacey Jo/Misty Dawn | California |
| 5. Giovanni Pennisi | F/V Irene's Way/Elaine | California |
| 6. Joshua McCoy | F/V Top Tuna | Florida |
| 7. Jay Lucas | F/V Casey 's Pride | Florida |
| 8. Harry Allen | F/V Shenanegan | Oregon |
| 9. John Alto | F/V Spring Persuader | Oregon |
| 10. Frank Akers | F/V LANOLA | Oregon |
| 11. Bryan Craig | F/V C-RAE | Oregon |
| 12. Anthony Cummings | F/V P.C. Hooker | Oregon |

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18. James Gagnon	F/V Esperanza	Oregon
19. Eli Icenogle	F/V Ingibjorg K	Oregon
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